AP Text Review

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Title: Siddhartha

Author: Herman Hesse

Year of Original Publication: 1922

Setting: Siddhartha takes place in Ancient India, and is coincident with the life of Buddha, most likely around 625 B.C.

Primary Characters:

1. Siddhartha - The protagonist of the story, Siddhartha, is the son of a Brahmin, and a prince. He lives the good life, the girls love him, he’s got an incredible family, and he is royalty. However, he wishes for something more - spiritual enlightenment. He possesses an incredible amount of patience and spiritual intuition, which he uses to achieve his major goals throughout the story. He is constantly questioning the world around him, but for good reason. He is the embodiment of spirituality, and a seeker of purpose and understanding.
2. Govinda - Siddhartha’s best friend. Govinda is completely devoted to his friend Siddhartha, and shares many of the same values, but not to the same extent. Unlike Siddhartha, he does not make the choice to create his own spiritual path, but instead, follows the path of others, most notably, Buddha. This is really the main difference between the two. They are both driven by spirituality, but Govinda needs a path to be created for him.
3. Vasudeva - Vasudeva is a ferryman that has long since achieved enlightenment, and it is evident. He is the most godlike creature in the entire book, but acts with the most humility out of anyone. It is Vasudeva that guides Siddhartha to his achievement of enlightenment through the teachings of The River. The second time Siddhartha encounters Vasudeva, it is after his attempted suicide, at which point, Vasudeva takes Siddhartha under his wing, and teaches him all he needs to know. Vasudeva leaves Earth when Siddhartha takes over as the ferryman after achieving enlightenment - Vasudeva’s teachings now live through Siddhartha.

Secondary Characters:

1. Siddhartha’s Father - A well respected Brahmin in Siddhartha’s community; responsible for instilling Siddhartha’s patience and spiritual values within him. Initially, he resists Siddhartha’s leaving to go with the Samanas, but eventually lets his son go on his journey.
2. The Samanas - A group of traveling ascetics, they believe in what is essentially self-torture and deprivation that will lead them to a life of self-actualization. They are completely focused on attaining and finding the “Self”. They initially captivate Siddhartha and Govinda, but are soon forsaken by the two as they choose instead to seek out Gotama.
3. Gotama/Buddha - An enlightened religious leader; said to have attained Nirvana, one of Siddhartha’s major teachers in the story. Govinda chooses to become a follower, while Siddhartha rejects his teachings, and creates his own path.
4. Kamala - Siddhartha’s love instructor, she helps him leave the life of the Samana behind him, and learn the ways of the city. Just before her death, which is caused by a snakebite, she reveals Siddhartha is the father of her son.
5. Kamaswami - This older businessman is Siddhartha’s business instructor. Unfortunately, Kamaswami’s lessons only lead Siddhartha to unhappiness; money and business are not a part of Siddhartha’s spirituality.

Point of view and other notable structural, literary, and stylistic techniques:

The point of view of Siddhartha is third-person omniscient, but the point of view follows our protagonist, Siddhartha, most closely. The tone of the book overall is very reserved, and reflects Siddhartha’s attitude throughout most of the book - it is relaxed, formal, and very nonchalant. Hesse never once rushes his words, and everything is explained with great depth, as long as it is important enough to explain. As far as literary and stylistic techniques go, there are various symbols and motifs throughout the novel, the most notable symbol being the river, and the most notable motif being “Om”. Hesse uses techniques that all other authors do: metaphor, simile, foreshadowing, etc. However, tone and symbolism definitely play the biggest role throughout the novel.

Major Conflict:

There really is only one major conflict within Siddhartha, and that is supposed to be meant figuratively and literally within the story. The conflict is within the protagonist Siddhartha; he is simply searching for total and complete spiritual enlightenment. He does this by moving from one teacher to the next, from one revelation to another, until he finds what he is looking for in his final teacher, Vasudeva.

Key scenes:

In “Gotama”, pages 25-29: Siddhartha finds a flaw within the Buddha’s teaching, and confronts the Illustrious One about it - he does not state how or what Buddha experienced when finding enlightenment. Siddhartha finds this flaw to be so major, that he has a revelation - he must not rely on others, or religious instructors, to find the meaning of life. He must find it in his own way.

In “Samsara” and “By the River”, pages 66 - 73: Siddhartha begins to realize that his present life has led to nothing, and it makes him sick. He begins to have dreams that suggest he must move on, and his disgust with himself, and his depression, are the final factors that cement his decisions. He realizes that his materials, his drinking, his gambling, and his life created by business have been completely meaningless. He leaves the city in despair, without telling anyone where or why he is leaving. He finds his way back to the river where he first met the ferryman, and settles on the idea of suicide. Just as he is about to plunge into the river, the Sacred Om reverberates through him, and his spirit reawakens. He recognizes his foolishness, and naps by the river.

In “The Son” and “Om”, pages 101-111: Siddhartha, as a novel, has two climaxes within a few pages of each other. In “The Son” Siddhartha’s son runs away, and Vasudeva and Siddhartha venture in the forest to attempt to find him. Siddhartha has yet another revelation: if he really loves his son, he will let him find his own path, just as his father did for him. When Siddhartha returns to Vasudeva, the second climax occurs in “Om”. Siddhartha finds enlightenment through the words of Vasudeva, and the sound of the river.

In “Govinda”, pages 121-122: These two pages are a depiction of Siddhartha helping Govinda to find his enlightenment. The pages are full of vivid imagery, metaphor, and many literary devices that show Hesse’s skills as a writer, and are a very fitting end to the book.

Key Quotations:

“There is one thing that this clear, worthy instruction does not contain; it does not contain the secret of what the Illustrious One himself experienced—he alone among hundreds of thousands. That is what I thought and realized when I heard your teachings. That is why I am going on my way—not to seek another doctrine, for I know there is none, but to leave all doctrines and all teachers and to reach my goal alone—or die” (27-28). Siddhartha says this to Gotama to tell him he will no longer be following him. It explains that Siddhartha is searching for his own enlightenment, and is not satisfied by simply listening to the teachings of others.

“Certainly. I have learned that form the river too; everything comes back. You, too, Samana, will come back. Now farewell, may your friendship be my payment! May you think of me when you sacrifice to the gods!” (40-41). This quote, spoken by the ferryman, is one of the most major foreshadows in the book; Siddhartha and the ferryman will meet again, and he will play a major role in Siddhartha’s life.

“The world had caught him; pleasure, covetousness, idleness, and finally also that vice that he had always despised and scorned as the most foolish - acquisitiveness. Property, possessions and riches had also finally trapped him. They were no longer a game and a toy; they had become a chain and a burden. [...] Siddhartha became impatient at losses, he lost his patience with slow-paying debtors, he was no longer kindhearted to beggars, he no longer had the desire to give gifts and loans to the poor” (63-64). This quote, spoken by the narrator, is a great depiction of Siddhartha’s decline after the peak of his “prosperity”, so to speak. This eventually leads to his attempted suicide, at which point, Vasudeva saves him.

“You are not strict with him, you do not punish him, you do not command him - because you know that gentleness is stronger than severity, that water is stronger than rock, that love is stronger than force” (97). This quote, spoken by Vasudeva, really is just an awesome quote, is very representative of the nature of the book as a whole - true spirituality and philosophy.

“He could no longer distinguish the different voices - the merry voice from the weeping voice, the childish voice from the manly voice. They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn, the laughter of the wise, the cry of indignation and the groan of the dying. They were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways. And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world. All of them together was the stream of events, the music of life” (110). This quote, spoken by the narrator, is a visual depiction of Siddhartha’s enlightenment, and is just very surreal and descriptive. Not only is it a fantastic representation of what is happening within Siddhartha, but it is also a solid representation of Hesse’s abilities as a writer.

“No longer knowing whether time existed, whether this display had lasted a second or a hundred years, whether there was a Siddhartha, or a Gotama, a Self and others…Govinda stood yet a while bending over Siddhartha’s peaceful face which he had just kissed, which had just been the stage of all present and future forms” (page 122) This passage explains that Govinda too is enlightened. He understands the concept of the unity of all things by seeing it in Siddhartha’s face. The passage reiterates the message that enlightenment can only come from experience.

Theme Statements/Central Questions:

Internal and external conflict both play very large roles in Siddhartha. How do these two compare and contrast, and affect each other?

By the end of the novel, four separate characters have achieved enlightenment. Is there enlightenment the same? Why or why not? What distinctions exist between each, and how did each character find their final goal?

Symbolism is one of the most used literary devices throughout the novel. Give examples of the most prevalent symbols within the story, and explain how they affect the work as a whole.

Reader Response:

This was my (Mitch) favorite book we did this year, by far. I’m really into this spiritual sort of thing, and I guess I’m always looking for something of this nature that I can truly believe in. I have yet to find it, but Siddhartha showed me a lot of things that I could really buy into, and use to help shape my actions and my life in general. I think a lot can be learned from this book, and you really don’t even have to read too hard between the lines. It’s all there. If anyone decided not to read it, and use Sparknotes instead, make it a summer read. It’s really really worth your time, I promise.

Notable Literary Devices:

The most notable literary devices, as mentioned, is symbolism. The biggest symbol within Siddhartha is arguably the river, which symbolizes all facets of life itself. It is unchanging, and constantly changing, all at the same time. Its flow represents that everything in life is connected, including time and all elements of nature. Also, like life, the river is capable of providing knowledge.

AP Prompts:

This text would be good for prompts like the one we did on Wednesday in class, obviously. Anything having to do with internal conflict or finding purpose in life can be applied perfectly to Siddhartha. In addition, essays that ask about character growth over time, or some sort of contrast between youth and adulthood could be answered by using Siddhartha. As far as literary devices go, symbolism related essays relate very well to Siddhartha, especially when taking contribution to meaning into account.